

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 127.

Last time, Zhuge Liang had launched his third Northern campaign, and he was off to a strong start, taking the previously troublesome passage of Chencang and then sacking the cities of Wudu (3,1) and Yinping (1,2). The man sent to stop him, Sima Yi, tried to retaliate by sending his vanguard generals Zhang He and Dai (4) Ling (2) to raid Zhuge Liang's camp, but Zhuge Liang had a trap waiting for them. Soon, the two Wei generals found themselves surrounded, and Zhuge Liang told them to surrender at once.

But Zhang He was furious at this insult. Pointing at Zhuge Liang, he cursed. "You are a country bumpkin who's encroaching on my kingdom's borders. How dare you speak such nonsense?! If I catch you, I will cut you to pieces!"

So Zhang He tried to fight his way up the hillside to get at Zhuge Liang. But he was immediately pushed back by a torrent of arrows and boulders. So he now charged right through the ranks of the Shu forces that surrounded him. Remember, Zhang He is the last surviving member of that elite club of officers who followed Cao Cao on his campaigns, and he was one of Wei's mightiest warriors. As he charged to and fro, no one dared to get in his way. When he had fought his way out, he realized that his lieutenant Dai Ling was still trapped inside the enemy ranks. So Zhang He turned around and dove back into the fray, rescuing Dai Ling and fighting his way out once again.

Watching from atop the hill, Zhuge Liang saw Zhang He storming here, there, and everywhere, seemingly growing more invigorated as the fight went on. Zhuge Liang turned to the officers by his side and said, "I often heard about the fight between Zhang He and Zhang Fei, and how its ferocity stunned everyone who witnessed it. Only now do I see what a warrior Zhang He is. He will be a thorn in our side if we allow him to live. I must eliminate him."

But today was not the day for that. With his prey having escaped, Zhuge Liang returned to camp with his army to plan his next move.

Meanwhile, Sima Yi had lined up his troops in front of the Shu camp, waiting for his raiding party to throw the back of the enemy's lines into chaos before attacking. Suddenly, he saw Zhang He and Dai Ling scrambling back to tell him that, uh, about that plan. We've got a slight problem.

"Zhuge Liang is truly divine!" a stunned Sima Yi said. "We must fall back."

So he ordered his army to return to camp and assume a defensive posture. As for Zhuge Liang, he returned to camp with countless captured weapons and horses, and he sent Wei Yan to go challenge for combat every day. But the Wei forces had learned their lesson, and they now refused to come out. So half a month passed without any further combat.

One day, while Zhuge Liang was contemplating his next move, he got word that the emperor had sent the official Fei (4) Yi (1) to deliver an edict. Zhuge Liang welcomed him in and performed the proper rituals for receiving an imperial edict. Fei Yi then started reading the decree. The edict announced that given Zhuge Liang's recent accomplishments, he was being promoted back to prime minister, a post from which he had demoted himself after the defeat on his first Northern campaign.

After Fei Yi finished reading the edict, Zhuge Liang said, "I have yet to accomplish the aims of the state. How can I be restored to my old post?"

But Fei Yi told him, "If your excellency do not accept, you would be refusing the emperor and disappointing the troops. Please, accept the post."

So after that very mild arm-twisting, Zhuge Liang acquiesced. And now people can go back to calling him prime minister, which they've been doing all this time anyway, since he was still acting prime minister. But now he gets a better parking spot for his four-wheel chariot.

Anyway, Zhuge Liang now came up with an idea to lure Sima Yi out from behind his barricades. He ordered his army to decamp and fall back. When spies reported this to Sima Yi, Sima Yi said, "Zhuge Liang must be up to something. We must not move lightly."

But Zhang He countered, "He must be falling back because he has run out of provisions. Should we not give chase?"

Sima Yi said, "According to my calculations, Zhuge Liang had a good harvest last year, and right now, the grains are ripe again, so he should have plenty of provisions. Even though transporting that grain may be difficult, he should still have enough to last a while. Why would he leave just like? This must be his trick to lure me out since I have refused to give battle for so many days. We should send men to scout far ahead."

So Sima Yi sent out some scouts, and they reported back that Zhuge Liang had set up another camp 10 miles up the road.

"I KNEW he wasn't leaving," Sima Yi said. "Let's stay in and fortify our defenses; do not advance lightly."

So 10 days passed, and there was no news whatsoever, nor did any Shu forces come to challenge for battle. Sima Yi sent out his scouts again, and they reported back that the enemy had fallen back another 10 miles.

"Zhuge Liang is using a slow retreat to gradually fall back to Hanzhong," Zhang He said to Sima Yi. "Commander, you are too suspicious. We should give chase. I am willing to go fight them!"

"Zhuge Liang is full of tricks. If something goes wrong, it will damage our army's morale. We cannot advance lightly."

"If I lose, I will accept punishment," Zhang He declared.

Since one of his senior officers is so eager, Sima Yi relented.

“If you want to go, then we should split our forces into two,” he told Zhang He. “You can lead one force and go on ahead and attack with everything you’ve got. I will lead the other force and follow, so as to guard against an ambush. Head out tomorrow and wait midway, then fight the next day so that your troops will be fresh.”

So it was settled. The next day, Zhang He and Dai (4) Ling (2) marched out with a few dozen officers and 30,000 crack troops. Just as Sima Yi ordered, they stopped halfway to the enemy camp and rested. Sima Yi, meanwhile, left a large army to defend his camp and took only 5,000 crack troops with him as he set out to back up Zhang He.

It didn’t take long for Zhuge Liang’s scouts to report all this to him. Hearing that the Wei army was camped midway, Zhuge Liang summoned his officers and said, “Now that the Wei forces are giving chase, we are in for a dogfight. You all must give everything you have. I will set up an ambush to cut off the enemy’s path of retreat, but this task must go to someone who is both smart and brave.”

As he spoke, Zhuge Liang looked over at Wei Yan, but Wei Yan simply lowered his head and said nothing, which was rather disappointing. Maybe he was just having a bad day, or perhaps he was sick of Zhuge Liang’s managerial style and still brooding about being used a decoy awhile back. Meanwhile, the general Wang Ping volunteered for the job.

“But what if you slip up?” Zhuge Liang asked.

“Then I shall be punished,” Wang Ping replied.

“[Sigh] Wang Ping is willing to risk life and limb. What true loyalty!” Zhuge Liang said with a sigh that was intended for Wei Yan’s ears. “But even so, the enemy is coming in two forces to trap our ambush. As brave and smart as Wang Ping is, he is still just one man. We need another officer to go with him. Alas, what a pity that there’s not another man in our ranks who is willing to risk his life and take the lead.”

Hint hint, Wei Yan. But Wei Yan remained silent. Another officer, however, stepped forward as soon as Zhuge Liang uttered those words. This was the general Zhang Yi (4). But Zhuge Liang was not done speaking to Wei Yan by proxy.

“Zhang He is a famous Wei general and has unrivaled valor; you’re no match for him,” Zhuge Liang told Zhang Yi (4).

“If I fail, I will deliver my head to you,” Zhang Yi (4) declared.

“If you dare to go, then you and Wang Ping can each lead 10,000 crack troops and lie in wait in the valley,” Zhuge Liang told Zhang Yi. “When the enemy arrives at your location, let all of them pass, and then sweep in behind them. If Sima Yi comes behind you, then split up. Zhang Yi will fend off the attack from the rear, while Wang Ping will lead the attack on the front. You must fight to the last, and I will send reinforcements.”

Once Wang Ping and Zhang Yi headed off, Zhuge Liang summoned the generals Jiang Wei and Liao Hua and told them, “I am giving you a silk pouch. Take 3,000 troops and go in stealth to lie in wait on the front side of the mountain. If you see that Wang Ping and Zhang Yi are surrounded and in dire straits, do not go help them. Open the pouch, and the instructions inside will save them.”

After that, Zhuge Liang called four officers -- Wu Ban, Wu Yi (4), Ma Zhong, and Zhang Yi (2) -- and whispered to them, “Tomorrow, the enemy will arrive with a full head of steam. We cannot meet them head on, so we will fight as we retreat. When Guan Xing and his troops attack, then you shall lead your men and turn around to attack, and I will send backup.”

He then told Guan Xing, “Take 5,000 crack troops and lie in wait in the valley. When you see a red flag waving from the top of the hill, attack.”

So everyone who was anyone in Zhuge Liang's officer corps got an assignment for the coming fight. Everyone, that is, except for Wei Yan, who certainly had his chances but passed them up and ended up being a spectator. He can't be happy about that. But hey, that's what you get for not stepping up.

Anyway, the next day, Zhang He and Dai Ling approached with the Wei forces, storming toward the Shu army. The Shu officers Wu Ban, Wu Yi, Ma Zhong, and Zhang Yi (2) came out to meet them. Zhang He was itching for a fight, so he spurred on his troops and attacked. The Shu forces fought as they fell back. The pursuit went on for almost 10 miles. It was the middle of June, and the weather was hot and stiflingly humid. After giving chase for 15, 20 miles, the Wei army was exhausted and sweating like crazy.

And now, Zhuge Liang waved a red banner from his perch atop a hill. Guan Xing and his battalion shot out, while the other four Shu officers came charging back with their army. But Zhang He and Dai Ling put up a dogged fight and refused to fall back. Suddenly, loud cries rose up as two more Shu armies appeared. This was the ambush led by Wang Ping and Zhang Yi (4), who now cut off the Wei army's path of retreat.

Undaunted, Zhang He shouted to his men, "We have come this far! What else is there to do but fight to the death?!"

Spurred on by their commander's courage, the Wei soldiers put up a stiff resistance. Still, they could not break free. But suddenly, more loud noises rose up from behind. This was the second Wei army, led by Sima Yi, who now directed his men to trap the Shu generals Wang Ping and Zhang Yi (4).

"His excellency is truly divine!" Zhang Yi (4) shouted. "It's exactly as he predicted. He must have a good plan in place. Let's fight to the death!"

So he and Wang Ping split up, just as Zhuge Liang instructed, and stood against both Wei armies. The sounds of battle raged nonstop as the two sides threw themselves at each other in a vicious struggle.

Meanwhile, the Shu officers Jiang Wei and Liao Hua watched this carnage from a hilltop in the distance. They saw that the Wei forces were starting to gain the upper hand, thanks to their superior numbers, and that their comrades were starting to falter.

“The situation is dire; it’s time to open the silk pouch and see the plan,” Jiang Wei said.

So they opened the pouch that Zhuge Liang had given them, and the instructions inside said, “If Sima Yi’s forces trap Wang Ping and Zhang Yi and the situation looks dire, you should split your forces into two and attack Sima Yi’s camp. Sima Yi will retreat, and you can attack him in the confusion. Even though you won’t be able to take his camp, we will still achieve total victory.”

So Jiang Wei and Liao Hua immediately set off in two forces for Sima Yi’s camp. Now, give Sima Yi some credit. This was something he was always on guard against. Even as he was marching his troops into battle, he kept sending out scouts to check on his camp. Sure enough, in the midst of battle, a scout brought word that two Shu armies were on their way to his main camp.

Sima Yi turned pale and told his men, “I KNEW Zhuge Liang had a trick up his sleeve, but you won’t listen to me and insisted on giving chase. And now, all is lost!”

So Sima Yi ordered a hasty retreat. Unfortunately, the hasty retreat soon turned into a sloppy retreat. Zhang Yi (4) now attacked, and the Wei forces were routed. Seeing things hit the fan, the Wei vanguard generals Zhang He and Dai Ling fled toward some backroads in the hills, and the day belonged to the Shu forces.

Having lost the battle, Sima Yi scrambled back to his own camp. By the time he got there, the Shu raiding parties had already come and gone. Sima Yi regrouped his tattered troops and then gave his officer corps a severe dressing down.

“You do not understand the art of war and insisted on going out to fight just because your blood was up! That’s why we lost! From now on, no rash moves. Anyone who disobeys will be punished!”

The Wei officers all slinked away with their heads hanging low. They had suffered a huge defeat, losing countless soldiers, horses, and weapons.

Meanwhile, over in the Shu camp, Zhuge Liang was getting ready to march forward after the big victory. But suddenly, a report arrived from the Shu capital Chengdu. The general Zhang Bao, who had gone back to Chengdu after breaking his head in battle in the last episode, was dead.

When Zhuge Liang heard this tragic news, he wept so hard that he coughed up blood and passed out. His staff quickly brought him around, but from that day on, Zhuge Liang was bed-ridden. After 10 days, he summoned a couple of his staffers and told them, "I am feeling faint and cannot tend to business. I think it's best that we return to Hanzhong so I can recover and wait for another opportunity. Do not let word of this slip. If Sima Yi finds out, he will surely attack."

He then ordered his army to decamp in the middle of the night and fall back to Hanzhong. It took five days after they left for Sima Yi to catch on, at which point Sima Yi sighed and said, "Not even the gods can divine Zhuge Liang's schemes. I am not his equal!"

And yet, despite not being Zhuge Liang's equal, and despite losing every engagement on this campaign, here was Sima Yi, having fended off another incursion from Zhuge Liang. He now kept his officers in the field and deployed troops to fortify key locations, while he himself returned to the capital. And thus concluded Zhuge Liang's third Northern campaign.

As for Zhuge Liang, he garrisoned his army in Hanzhong while he returned to the capital Chengdu to recover. All the officials waited outside the city to welcome him and then accompanied him back to his residence. The emperor also came to pay his respects and sent the royal physician to tend to Zhuge Liang. Gradually, Zhuge Liang got better.

Zhuge Liang wasn't the only senior commander who got better. In the seventh month of the year 230, the Wei commander Cao Zhen, who had been holed up in the Wei capital Luoyang because of an illness, had recovered sufficiently, and he now wrote a memorial to the emperor. This memorial said:

"The Shu forces have encroached on our borders and invaded our territory time and again. If we do not eliminate them, they will be trouble down the road. Right now, it is autumn. The weather is cool, and our troops are idle. This is the perfect time for a campaign. Your servant is willing to lead a large army with Sima Yi to attack Hanzhong, wipe out the rebels, and pacify our borders."

The Wei emperor Cao Rui was delighted by this eagerness, and he asked the senior official Liu Ye (4) what he thought.

"The general is quite right," Liu Ye replied. "If we do not eliminate the rebels now, they will become a major concern. Your highness should give your consent."

Cao Rui nodded in agreement, and Liu Ye took his leave and returned home. After he got home, some officials came calling and asked, "We heard that you discussed with his majesty plans for invading Shu. What's the word?"

"There's no such thing," Liu Ye told them. "Shu has the barriers of the mountains and cannot be taken easily. It would be a waste of men and resources and will not benefit the kingdom."

That reply sent the officials away in silence. One of them then went to see the emperor and said, "We heard yesterday that Liu Ye had advised your highness to invade Shu, but then today, he told us Shu cannot be invaded. He was clearly lying to your highness. You should ask him about that."

So Cao Rui summoned Liu Ye and asked, hey, what game are you playing?

"Upon further consideration, your servant concluded that this invasion is not feasible," Liu Ye told him.

That reply made Cao Rui laugh out loud. Momentarily, the official who had tattled to Cao Rui about Liu Ye left. Only now did Liu Ye explain to Cao Rui, "My advice yesterday about invading Shu was

important state business. How can I let it slip out to others? Cunning is the heart of warfare, and secrecy is vital before an action commences.”

“You’re quite right,” Cao Rui said, and from that day forth, he respected Liu Ye even more.

Within 10 days, Sima Yi returned to the capital and went to see Cao Rui. When Cao Rui told him about Cao Zhen’s proposed invasion of Shu, Sima Yi replied, “I expect that Dongwu will not dare to mobilize its troops yet, so now is the perfect time to invade Shu.”

So Cao Rui appointed Cao Zhen as chief commanding officer and First Field Marshal who Conquers the West. Sima Yi was named chief general and Second Field Marshal who Conquers the West. You gotta love these titles. Liu Ye was appointed the military strategist, and the three of them led 400,000 troops to Chang’an. From there, they marched toward the Sabre Pass, the aforementioned treacherous mountain passage into Shu. Other officers, such as Guo Huai and Sun Li (3), also advanced along other routes.

Word of this invasion quickly reached the Shu capital Chengdu, where Zhuge Liang had long since recovered from his illness. He had been spending his days drilling his troops and studying formations, and he was now once again contemplating an invasion of the Heartlands. When he got news that the Heartlands were coming to him, he summoned the officers Zhang Yi (2) and Wang Ping and said, “Take 1,000 men and go defend the ancient road to Chencang so as to hold off the enemy. I will follow with the main army to back you up.”

Uhh, a thousand men? You’ve got to kidding me.

“We have heard that the the Wei army numbers some 400,000 and claims to be 800,000,” the two generals told Zhuge Liang. “Their numbers are vast. How can we defend a key location with only a thousand men? What will we do when the enemy arrives en masse?”

“If I send too many men, I am afraid it would exhaust the troops,” Zhuge Liang said.

Uhh ... Wang Ping and Zhang Yi (2) looked at each other like, he’s got to be joking, right? Sensing their skepticism, Zhuge Liang said, “If anything goes wrong, you will not be at fault. No need to say anything else, just go.”

But the two generals were still not convinced. In fact, the only thing they were convinced of was that Zhuge Liang had it out for them and was trying to get rid of them.

“If your excellency want to kill us, then please do it now,” they told him. “We do not dare to take on this assignment.”

Laughing out loud, Zhuge Liang now said, “What silliness?! Since I’m sending you on this mission, I naturally have a plan. Judging by the heavens, there will be heavy rain this month. Even though the Wei army is large, they will not dare to traverse the treacherous mountain terrain. That is why we don’t need that many men. No harm will come to you. I will keep the main army in Hanzhong for one month and wait for the enemy to fall back. Then, I will attack. Our troops will rest while the enemy labors. In this way, my army of 100,000 will be able to defeat an enemy four times our size.”

See, why didn’t you just say so from the beginning? Zhuge Liang could really get carried away with this secret scheme thing. The two officers were delighted by his explanation and took their leave. Zhuge Liang then followed with the main army and instructed his troops to fortify all the key locations, check on firewood and grain, and store enough provisions to last one month so as to wait out the autumn rain. He then gave the army a month off, along with that month’s supplies, while he waited for the right time to launch his campaign.

Meanwhile, the Wei commanders Cao Zhen and Sima Yi marched their huge army to the fortress at Chencang. When they entered, however, they did not see a single house. They asked the locals, and

were told that when Zhuge Liang retreated back to Hanzhong during his last expedition, he had burned the place to the ground.

Cao Zhen wanted to march on, but Sima Yi advised against it.

“We must not advance lightly,” Sima Yi said. “Judging from the night sky, there will be heavy rain this month. If we venture deep into enemy territory, we would have little room for error. If we slip up in the slightest, our troops will suffer, and it will be hard to fall back. We should set up tents inside the fortress and stay here to wait out the rain.”

Cao Zhen followed this advice, and sure enough, less than two weeks later, the sky opened up and a torrential downpour ensued. It rained nonstop, and outside the fortress, more than two feet of water accumulated, soaking all the weapons. It rained so hard that the soldiers had trouble sleeping. The rain came down for 30 straight days. The horses ran out of food, and countless starved to death. The soldiers, meanwhile, complained incessantly.

Word of this downpour got back to the Wei capital, and the emperor Cao Rui went so far as to pray for good weather, but to no avail. Several court officials now petitioned Cao Rui to recall the army, and Cao Rui acquiesced.

Meanwhile, back in Chencang, Cao Zhen said to Sima Yi, “It has been raining for 30 days. The army has lost all appetite for battle and the men all want to go home. How do we stop this?”

“Why don’t we fall back?” Sima Yi said.

“But what if Zhuge Liang comes after us?”

“We must leave two armies behind as ambush before we retreat,” Sima Yi said.

Just then, an envoy arrived, delivering the imperial edict recalling the army. So Cao Zhen and Sima Yi turned their army around and pulled out slowly.

Inside Hanzhong, Zhuge Liang calculated that it had been raining for a month and that the rain should be done by now, even though the sky was still overcast. He now moved his army into position and assembled his officers.

“I expect that the enemy must be retreating,” he told them. “The Wei emperor has recalled Cao Zhen and Sima Yi. If we give chase, they will be prepared. We should just let them go and look for another opportunity.”

Suddenly, a messenger arrived from the general Wang Ping, informing Zhuge Liang that the Wei army had retreated, and Zhuge Liang sent word to Wang Ping to not give chase. His officers, however, were nonplused.

“The Wei army has suffered from the rain and cannot garrison, that is why they are leaving,” they said to Zhuge Liang. “This is the perfect time to attack, so why is your excellency not giving chase?”

“Sima Yi is adept at war,” Zhuge Liang told them. “He must have an ambush covering his retreat. If I give chase, I would fall into his trap. Instead, I will let them go far, and then split my forces to march out through Xie (2) Gorge and take Qi Mountain while the enemy’s guard is down.”

Now, when Zhuge Liang lays out a scheme, his officer corps usually responds with something like, “Your brilliant tactics are truly divine.” But this time, they were rather skeptical. To see why, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!